IN THE CLAIMS:

Please amend the claims as follows:

1. (Original) A method for link level alignment of processing modules in a distributed processing environment, the method comprising:

(a) at a first processing module, sending an alignment request message to a second processing module;

(b) including, in the alignment request message, at least one link level communications protocol version supported by the first processing module;

(c) at the second processing module, receiving the alignment request message, selecting a link level communications protocol version based on the version in the alignment request message and parameter values for that version;

(d) sending an alignment grant message from the second processing module to the first processing module including the selected link level communications protocol version and the parameter values;

(e) at the first processing module, receiving the alignment grant message, selecting link level communications parameter values based on the parameters in the alignment grant message and sending an alignment grant acknowledgement message including the selected parameter values to the second processing module; and

(f) sending messages between the first and second processing module using the selected link level communications protocol version and parameter values.

2. (Original) The method of claim 1 wherein sending an alignment request message includes sending an alignment request (ARQ) link status signal unit (LSSU) including a payload, the payload including the link level communications protocol version.

3. (Canceled)

4. (Canceled)

5. (Original) The method of claim 1 comprising sending an alignment grant message from the first processing module to a third processing module that does not support link level communications protocol parameter negotiation.

6. (Original) The method of claim 5 comprising, at the third processing module, formulating an alignment grant message and forwarding the alignment grant message to the first processing module.

7. (Canceled)

8. (Currently Amended) The method of claim [[7]]6 comprising performing link level communications between the first and third processing modules using a default set of link level communications protocol parameters supported by the first and third processing modules.

9. (Original) The method of claim 1 wherein steps (a)-(f) are performed by SS7 link interface modules in a signal transfer point.

10. (Original) The method of claim 1 wherein step (a) occurs independently of application data that the first processing module has to send.

11. (Original) A method for negotiating link level communications parameters between processing modules in a distributed processing system, the method comprising:

(a) exchanging messages between first and second processing modules for establishing link level communications between the first and second processing modules, the messages including link level communications protocol parameters supported by the first and second processing modules;

(b) agreeing on a common set of link level communications protocol parameters usable by the first and second processing modules; and

(c) establishing link level communications between the first and second processing modules using the common set of parameters.

12. (Original) The method of claim 11 wherein exchanging messages between first and second processing modules includes exchanging link status signaling units (LSSUs) between the first and second processing modules.

13. (Canceled)

14. (Canceled)

15. (Canceled)

16. (Canceled)

17. (Original) The method of claim 11 wherein the link level communications protocol parameters include at least one of a retransmission algorithm and retransmission timers.

18. (Original) The method of claim 11 wherein the link level communications protocol parameters include data rates supported by the first and second processing modules.

19. (Original) The method of claim 11 wherein exchanging messages between the first and second processing modules includes exchanging the messages independently of application data ready to be sent by the first and second processing modules.

20. (Original) The method of claim 11 comprising exchanging messages between the first processing module and a third processing module that does not support link level communications parameter negotiation and establishing communications between the first and third processing modules using a default set of parameters supported by the third processing module.

21. (Original) The method of claim 20 wherein exchanging messages between the first and third processing modules includes exchanging link status signal units (LSSUs) between the first and third processing modules.

22. (Canceled)

23. (Canceled)

24. (Canceled)

25. (Canceled)

26. (Original) A system for link level alignment of processing modules in a distributed processing system, the system comprising:

(a) first and second processing modules coupled to a common bus and supporting link level communications parameter negotiation; and

(b) a third processing module coupled to the bus, the third processing module not supporting link level communications protocol parameter negotiation, wherein the first and second processing modules are adapted to negotiate link level communications protocol parameters with each other and to communicate with each other using the negotiated parameters and wherein the first and second processing modules are adapted to communicate with the third processing module using a default set of link level communications protocol parameters supported by the third processing module.

27. (Currently Amended) The system of claim 26 wherein the first, second, and third processing modules each comprise SS7 link interface modules or a data communications module for sending and receiving IP telephony signaling messages over IP signaling links.

28. (Canceled)

29. (Canceled)

30. (Original) The system of claim 26 wherein the first processing module is adapted to send an alignment request message to the second processing module to negotiate a link level communications protocol version.

31. (Canceled)

32. (Canceled)

33. (Canceled)

34. (Original) The system of claim 26 wherein the first and second processing modules are adapted to discover that the third processing module does not support link level communications parameter negotiation by exchanging link status signal units (LSSUs) with the third processing module.

35. (Original) The system of claim 34 wherein the first and second processing modules are adapted to negotiate the link level communications protocol parameters by exchanging LSSUs to negotiate a parameter exchange protocol and to negotiate the parameters using the parameter exchange protocol.

36. (Original) The system of claim 34 wherein the first and second processing modules are adapted to exchange messages for negotiating the link level communications protocol parameters independently of application data ready to be sent by the first and second processing modules.